FLOWER OF THE GORSE

By LOUIS TRACY

(Continued from last Sunday.)

BUT Tollemache sat bolt upright, his shoulders squared, his strong features frowning in thought. Thus had he looked when swinging precariously above the precipice at Le Faouet, and thus when the Hirondelle was backing into the hell's broth of the reef.

"Tell you what, old sport, we must act, and quickly at that," he said at last, springing to his feet as though some valiant deed was called for straight away.

"But what can I do?" came the despairing answer, and Ingersoll, the leader, the master, the kindly cynic, lifted woebegone eyes to the lithe and stalwart figure towering above him.

"Lots!" cried Tollemache. "First, let's get down to bedrock—then we can talk plainly. I've never said a word to you, Ingersoll, and mighty little to your daughter; but I love Yvonne, and if she will marry me our wedding day will be the proudest day of my life. I'm not a poor man. I've a heap more money than ever I've owned up to, because I like the life here, and I like you, and I worship the ground Yvonne walks on, and I was afraid that if you knew I was fairly well fixed in a financial sense you'd regard me as a poseur and cut me out. Why, I've saved nearly $10,000 a year since I came to Pont Aven! I can lay my hands to-morrow on $100,000, and still have enough left to keep Yvonne in pretty good shape.

"Now, I'm not making any bargain with you. That isn't our way. But if I am given a free hand with Raymond I'll settle his hash in double quick time. Swine of his variety are always blackmailers. Very well! I'll pay his price. He must clear out, bag and baggage, giving me the promise of his silence, over and above an acknowledgment that he obtained the money by threatening to expose Mrs. Carmac. Don't imagine he won't go! I'll make him! It's rather rotten even to talk of using violence to a fellow with a broken arm; but he must be got rid of, and I'll frighten him into a deal—see if I don't!"

Ingersoll rose and caught the younger man's hand in an impulsive grip. "Lorry," he said, "if it pleases Providence to ordain that Yvonne shall marry you, I'll offer thanks on my knees. You are honest as the sun and transparent as the Aven beneath the trees of the Bois d'Amour in summer. I have known your story for years. I had hardly learned your name before a man told me of the quarrel with your father because you refused to fall in with some marriage brokerage arranged between him and the father of a girl whose business interests marched with his. I knew, too, that you bought ten of my pictures during the first six months of our acquaintance. I didn't interfere with your well meaning subterfuge. You have lost nothing on that speculation, at any rate, because you acquired my work at its best period, and your investment would yield 200 per cent if you sold now.

"But let that pass. Do you believe I would ever have encouraged you to waste your time in pursuing the fickle goddess of art but for the knowledge that you were happy and content and far removed from the temptations that beset youngsters of means but of no occupation? No, you know well that I should have driven you forth with hard words. Yet I have never deceived you. How often have I said that art is a cruel mistress, a wanton who refuses her favors to some most ardent wooers, yet flings them with prodigal hands at others, who, though worthy of her utmost passion, despise it? But you have a quality that ranks you far above the painter who, while fitted to see divine things, wallows in the mud of mediocrity. You are a loyal friend and good comrade, a man of clean soul and single thought.

"Would to Heaven I might leave you now to deal with this prying hound, Raymond! But the plan you suggest is useless. He would laugh at you, disregard your threats and taunt you with personal designs on Mrs. Carmac's millions. You have forgotten, Lorry, that Yvonne is her daughter. I know my wife's nature to the depths. She has drunk to nausea of the nectar of wealth. What has it given her? Happiness? Good health? A contented mind? No; she is scourged with scorpions, torn by a thousand regrets. She would give all her money now if some magician would wipe out from her life the record of the last eighteen years. Very gladly, very humbly, would she dwell in this cottage, provided that no cloud existed between her and Yvonne. But that cannot be. As offering a middle way, I have agreed that Yvonne shall visit her at intervals, and even that small concession has delighted her beyond measure. And what will be the outcome? No matter what I may say, she will try to capture my girl's heart with a shower of gold.

"No; I don't believe for one moment that she will ever estrange Yvonne from me. I do not even commit the injustice of attributing any such design to her. But that Yvonne will inherit Carmac's millions if they are left undisturbed in her mother's possession is almost as certain as death—the one certainty life holds for us poor mortals. And, above all, don't hug the delusion that the man who has discovered my wife's pitiful secret is not alive to this phase of a problem which is in my mind night and day to the exclusion of all else. He will exact a price which you cannot pay. Each hour his ambitions mount higher. That unhappy woman is as powerless as a fawn caught in the coils of a python."

"One can free the fawn by dislocating the python's vertebræ. Is there any harm in my trying?"

"You may not kill the man. If you tackle him openly, you admit the very contention that he may never be able to establish in a court of law, because, although he may have ferreted out the prior marriage, he cannot yet be sure that there the divorce may not hold good. Even I myself am doubtful in that respect. It is a difficult legal point. Obviously Stella fears something. The fact that she has retained Raymond when she meant to dismiss him seems to indicate a weak spot in her armor. No, Lorry. I've looked at this thing from every point of view, and I see no loophole of escape. She is trapped, and Raymond alone can set her free. We must await his pleasure, act when he acts, and strive to assist her when the crisis arrives. Meanwhile, for her sake we must endeavor to tolerate him."

Tollemache sat down again. "I feel like my namesake, Saint Lawrence the Martyr," he said gloomily. "You remember that when he was put on a gridiron, and done to a crisp golden brown on one side, he suggested that by way of a change his executioners should grill him a little on the other. Gee, whizz! That reminds me, Socrates—if Sainte Barbe can't arrange matters better for pilgrims to her shrine, she ought to go out of the business. Here are Madeleine, Yvonne, you and myself mixed up in fifty-seven varieties of trouble! And, I suppose, Mere Pitou and little Barbe will receive attention in turn. If ever I meet Sainte Barbe in Kingdom Come, I'll tell her her real name! It strikes me that whoever invented the pin-dropping scheme knew what he was doing."

Ingersoll needed no explanation of his friend's outburst against the gentle lady whose love story has descended through the centuries. It was a confession of sheer impotence. He was forcing himself to admit that he could no more stay the course of events than stem the next tide rushing in from the Atlantic.

Feeling that he wanted to bite something, Tollemache lit his pipe and clenched the stem viciously between his strong teeth. Aroused by the striking of the match, Ingersoll began to smoke, too. The attitude of the two bespoke their sense of utter helplessness. Thus might men imprisoned on some volcanic island sit and await in dumb misery the next upheaval of the trembling earth.

At last Tollemache, whose lively and strenuous temperament rebelled against indecision, even in circumstances such as these, where one false move might precipitate the very crisis he wished to avoid, put a question which Ingersoll had been expecting and fearing since their talk began.

"I take it you haven't told Yvonne what you have told me?" he said. "I can't recall your exact words, but you implied that she is ignorant of the true nature of the dilemma her mother is in."

"Yes, that's the worst of it," muttered Ingersoll. "It comes hard, Lorry, to parade the wretchedness of forgotten years before one's own daughter—a girl like Yvonne, whose mind is an unblemished mirror. Before this blight fell on our lives I don't believe she really understood why sin and wrongdoing should exist. We dwelt apart. We moved and breathed in a gracious world of our own contriving. She read of evil in books and newspapers; but it passed her by, leaving her unruffled as our earth when astronomers report some clash of suns in the outer universe. Now, although her mother's callousness is patent to her, and this mad escapade of Madeleine's has stabbed her as with a dagger, she is wholly unaware of the chief offence, my neglect to facilitate the divorce proceedings."

"For the first time in our acquaintance, Socrates, I've got to say that you're talking nonsense," blurted out Tollemache excitedly. "It's bad enough that Mrs. Carmac—I suppose I'd better stick to that name for her—should be in such a hole, and we be unable at present to pull her out. But it's absolute rot that you should blame yourself for her mismanagement of her own affairs. Dash it all! Where is the man or woman who can act to-morrow in face of such an experience as yours as they might, twenty years hence, wish they had acted? That's no way to look at things. Tell Yvonne, I say. Tell her to-night. Then she can discuss the situation fairly and squarely with her mother. Don't you see, heaps of things may have occurred which, if you knew of them, might modify your judgment? This American divorce may be bad law in England, but good law in France. That lawyer fellow, Mr. Bennett, struck me as a wise old codger. He, or some one like him, might put Mrs. Carmac up to all sorts of dodges to do Raymond in the eye. And, in any event, don't start accusing yourself to Yvonne. If you do, d'ye know what the upshot will be? She'll take your side against her mother, and where will Mrs. Carmac be then?"

"Probably you are right, Lorry. I have learned to distrust my own thoughts. Yes, I'll tell Yvonne the whole truth."

Ingersoll spoke in the accents of stoic despair; but Tollemache was in fighting mood and eager to close with the enemy.

"It's sound policy to defend by attacking," he went on, with an air of profundity that at any other time the older man would have found intensely amusing. "That's what we were taught in college football, and it's true of every other kind of rough and tumble. Why shouldn't Mrs. Carmac blow Raymond and his blackmailing schemes sky high by making a deal with Fosdyke and the other relatives? The cake is big enough, you say, that each should get a good slice and be satisfied. As for legal proceedings in England, who's going to prosecute? Not you. And who else can act? The more I look at this affair the more I'm convinced it's a bogey that will fall to bits at the first straight punch."

Certainly the enthusiastic advocate of strong measures seemed to have hit on a project that, though difficult, was not wholly impracticable. If Fosdyke had only kept clear of that stupid intrigue with Madeleine Demoret, a settlement by consent might come well within the bounds of reason.

For the first time in many days Ingersoll saw a gleam of light in a choking fog. He brightened perceptibly, and talked with some of his wonted animation.

Neither man noticed how the time was slipping by until Mère Pitou summoned them to supper. Yvonne had not arrived, so they assumed that she had remained with Mrs. Carmac. About 10 o'clock Ingersoll—probably in a state of subdued nervousness as to the outcome of the projected disclosure—asked Tollemache to convey a message to Yvonne that she was wanted at home.

Lorry obeyed cheerfully. He believed he had blundered on a means of discomfiting the rascally secretary, and, that laudable object once attained, the path was clear for his own lovemaking. Though his aims and hopes differed from Harvey Raymond's as the open sea from a slime-covered morass, he too made the mistake of imagining that money could level all obstacles; which, if regarded as an infallible maxim, is misleading alike to the just and the unjust.

Usually, when returning to the hotel from the cottage, he took the short cut by the footbridge on which Yvonne had encountered Madeleine and Fosdyke. He was aware, however, that the girl habitually used the slightly longer but more open highway. So he turned into the Concarneau road, and was approaching the main bridge (the famous old pont that gives the village its name) when he saw two people sauntering slowly toward the harbor and apparently engaged in close converse. They were some distance away and partly hidden in the deep shadow of a fifteenth century mill with curious carvings beneath the roof of a lion and a man, but he could not be mistaken as to Yvonne and Raymond, for no girl in Pont Aven carried herself with Yvonne's grace, and the misshapen little secretary was in a class apart.

Evidently Raymond had offered his escort to Yvonne and they were extending a somewhat late promenade to enable the former to convey such news as he had to give of the journey to Quimperlé. Possibly he had received an answer from that mysterious "friend," Duquesne. Nevertheless, Tollemache was aware of a sudden lessening of his exaltation. It was as though when overheated by exertion he had entered a cold and clammy vault. He could give no valid reason why he should not quicken his pace and overtake Yvonne with her father's message. Yet he hung back, conscious of a sense of intrusion, yet furious with himself on account of this inexplicable hesitancy.

Finally he compromised. Yvonne would surely not take a prolonged stroll after 10 o'clock at night. He would walk a little way up the old Concarneau road (so called because, after the fashion of ancient tracks, it climbs a steep hill boldly, while its modern supplanter follows a longer and easier sweep) and keep in the gloom of the ancient houses clustered there until he saw her making for the cottage. With growing impatience, and a prey to not a little misgiving, he waited fully half an hour.

At last she appeared, walking swiftly and alone. And now his anxiety yielded to astonishment. Coming quietly down the hill and crossing the Place au Beurre, he was just in time to see her vanish into the obscurity of the Rue Mathias. At any rate, then, she was heading for Mère Pitou's. Glancing toward the harbor, he fancied he could make out Raymond at the end of the short, narrow street.

He did not think it necessary to lurk in the background until Raymond passed, but went to the hotel and stood on the terrace under the sycamores, but well in view of any one approaching the annex.

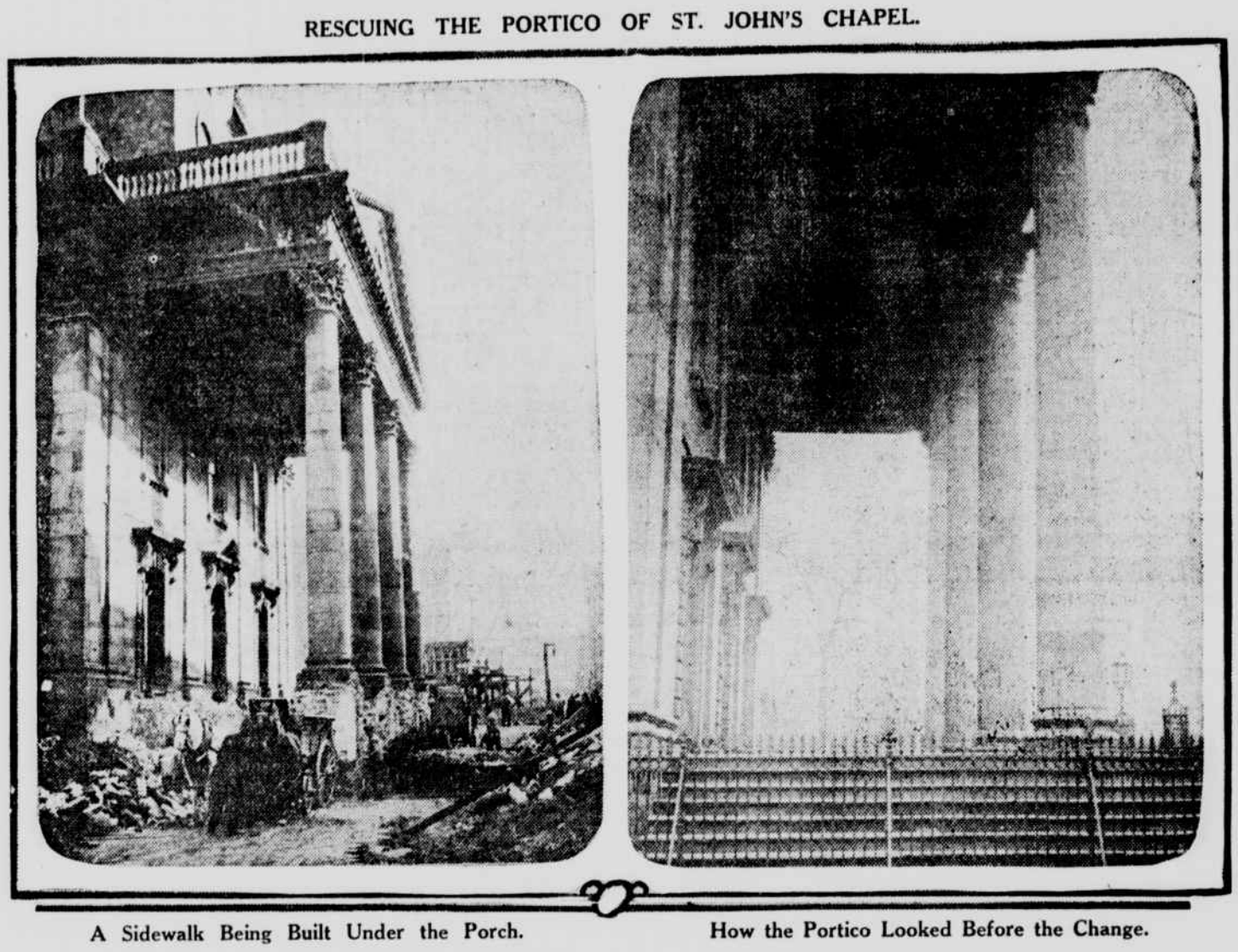
Soon Raymond came, picking his steps with careful slowness and keeping to the well lighted centre of the square. His chin was sunk in the upturned collar of an overcoat and he had the aspect of one lost in thought. Yet he seemed to know of Tollemache's presence and raised his eyes in a steady stare when the two were within a few yards of each other.

He did not speak, but his pallid face creased into a malevolent grin. Whether or not this was intended as a polite recognition Tollemache neither knew nor cared. He returned Raymond's stare with the impassivity of a red Indian, and though puzzled and distressed, resolved to look in on Harry Jackson before retiring for the night.

In after life Tollemache never forgot that moment. It was big with fate. Perhaps, if left to their own course, events might have followed the same channel next day or some succeeding day. But there could be no questioning the tremendous significance of that particular hour when its outcome was recalled in the after light of accomplished facts.

Thenceforth there was no damming the torrent that swept away men and women in its fury. Some were lost for evermore, some were thrown, bruised and maimed, on far distant strands, but all were caught in an irresistible flood, and if Tollemache were a visionary he might have heard the rush of mighty waters as he turned to enter the hotel.

RESCUING THE PORTICO OF ST. JOHN'S CHAPEL.



A Sidewalk Being Built Under the Porch. How the Portico Looked Before the Change.

CHAPTER XII.

Wherein Both the Reef and Mr. Raymond Yield Information.

Yvonne was looking forward to Raymond's return from Quimperlé with an ill-concealed restlessness that drew a sympathetic inquiry from her mother.

"Are you still fretting about Madeleine?" she said.

This solicitude was not feigned, but it centred wholly in Yvonne. The folly or stupidity of some pert village maid whom she had never either seen or cared to see did not interest Mrs. Carmac in the least. Had she voiced her real feeling in the matter she would have condemned her daughter's lack of proportion. During half a lifetime she had dwelt among the elect. To her it was quite immaterial whether or not Madeleine's career was ruined. Nor was this a mere pose on her part. She had trained herself to think that way. Yet, so sharply may deeds clash with personal inclination, both she and Walter Carmac were noted for their philanthropy. She strove to do good, but not by stealth. She could lecture Rupert Fosdyke with genuine zeal; but, while seeking to reform the victimizer, she had little pity for the victim. From her point of view, Madeleine was one of a fixed percentage of girls who rebelled against the social law. Of course, one tried to reduce their number, but it was almost bad form to wear one's heart out because the expected had happened.

Yvonne, though she would not have cared to put her impressions into words, was aware of this attitude on her mother's part, and it saddened her inexpressibly. At such moments a seemingly impassable gulf yawned between them. Madeleine had been her trusted associate since they were babies together, toddling up the hill in convoy of some older girl to the kindergarten class in the convent. She knew that her friend was pure minded and warm hearted. Nothing could have shocked her so greatly as the discovery that a man like Rupert Fosdyke should have succeeded in so brief a time in undermining the moral structure that Brittany builds so solidly in its women folk.

"I shall never cease fretting about her," she answered. "If by some cruel chance Mr. Raymond's friend fails me, I am minded to ask my father to come with me to Paris to-morrow. Madeleine will not resist me if once we are brought face to face."

"Your father has far too much sense," said Mrs. Carmac composedly.

"Oh, please don't talk in that strain. I cannot bear it," pleaded the girl.

"It hurts, of course; but isn't it better to look at the facts squarely? I am surprised that Mr. Raymond, who has more experience in life, should have flown on a wild goose chase to Quimperlé. It is nothing else. If Madeleine is actually on her way to Paris the journey is a matter of obvious arrangement. Rupert will unquestionably meet her at the Gare St. Lazare, and what opportunity will your deputy have then of making any appeal to the girl herself? Rupert would simply take him by the collar and swing him aside. You see, Yvonne, I am forty-two and you are twenty. We survey life from different angles."

"From different levels, at any rate," said Yvonne, closing her ears to the cold accuracy of her mother's reasoning. "You gaze down on us simple Pont Avenois from the altitude of New York and London, while I cannot peer above the eaves of our little mills. I am looking now through the low door of a desolate cottage, and I can discern a broken-hearted woman crooning her sorrow by the embers of a dying fire. Oh, mother, mother, if ever you would have me love you as a daughter you must try and realize that my very heartstrings are twined around my Breton friends, that I rejoice with them and grieve with them, that I love them for their many virtues and condone their few faults! I have never knowingly wished evil to any one, but if God in his mercy should preserve my dear Madeleine from that horrid man I would not care what means His wisdom adopted. Even though Fosdyke marries her, Madeleine will not be happy, and I cannot think that if he meant to behave honorably he would have tempted her to plunge her people into such distress by leaving home clandestinely."

Mrs. Carmac could have rocked with laughter at the notion of Rupert Fosdyke marrying Madeleine Demoret. But she curbed the impulse. Despite her primitive simplicity, Yvonne was in an excitable mood that night, and this affair must be allowed to settle itself without disturbing their good relations.

"Well," she sighed, affecting an accord she did not feel, "we can only hope now that your telegram will prove effective. Who is the person whose aid Mr. Raymond is securing?"

"A Monsieur Duquesne."

Mrs. Carmac wrinkled her smooth forehead. "I have not heard the name," she said, after a pause. "But there is nothing unusual in that. Raymond is curiously secretive. Any other man, living in a household on the footing he occupied in the Chase and in Charles Street, would have spoken at times of his relatives. He, for all I know of his earlier history, might have been born in—Saturn. I was going to say Mars, but Mr. Raymond does not meet one's ideal of a Martian."

At that Yvonne was constrained to smile. Neither she nor the woman who dismissed Raymond and Duquesne so flippantly could guess what sinister influences lurked behind the association of those two men. An astrologer would have found something ominous in that haphazard reference to the planetary harbingers of disaster, Saturn and Mars, and, oddly enough, a half thought of this sort did flit through Yvonne's mind, because she often found amusement and interest during the mild and clear winters of Brittany in reading the firmament from a stellar atlas, and there was hardly a constellation in the northern heavens she could not name at sight.

At that moment, however, relief from a rather forced conversation came in the shape of Captain Popple's burly form.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, for intrudin' at this time," he said, when admitted, "but I thought you'd like to hear the result of to-day's operations on the reef. Atween Peridot an' a trawl, we've been doin' things."

"Is Peridot here—in Pont Aven?" interrupted Yvonne, blanching in quick alarm.

"Yes, miss. He kem from Concarneau this mornin', an' I've brought him up the river on to-night's tide."

"Where is he now?"

"I'm not quite sure, miss. He left me a couple o' minutes since. While I was havin' a word with Jackson Peridot went up the hill."

"Was he tired?"

Popple was undoubtedly perplexed by this sudden concern as to Peridot's physical condition; but he answered readily enough, "Well, miss, if he isn't he ought to be. We've been hard at it, high water and low, for fourteen hours."

Yvonne was so visibly relieved that Popple's bewilderment increased. Of course he had heard no word of Madeleine's flight, and he could not understand that if Peridot had gone home and to bed there was a chance that the fisherman might leave the village again early in the morning without being told the disastrous news, since Madame Larraidou was a cautious old body, who would not vex her son with idle gossip.

Popple hesitated. If further details of Peridot's well being were needed, he was ready to vouch for the Briton's apparent good health and complete sobriety.

Mrs. Carmac fathomed his difficulty at once. "Go on, captain," she smiled. "Miss Ingersoll only wanted to be assured that Peridot was safe in his cottage. His mother was anxious about him—that is all."

"No need, ma'am, I assure you," said Popple, earnestly. "He's one of the best, is Peridot. For a Frenchman, I've never met his ekal. I had a sort of notion he'd bring good luck, an' he did too. We've got your boxes!"

Mrs. Carmac stood up. Her pale cheeks flushed with gratification. "I am more than pleased," she cried. "Where are they? Can they be brought here to-night?"

"No, ma'am; not both, that is. Like meself, I reckon, you're forgettin' the ways of a French custom house. I've got yours, because it was open; but the other one, which is locked, had to be left in a shed down below there until the key is produced. I tried to tell some chap in a blue coat and cheese-cutter cap that if poor Mr. Carmac had any cigars or cigarettes in his cabin trunk they wouldn't be of much account after soakin' in salt water for a matter o' ten days or thereabouts; but, bless your heart, he wouldn't listen. Mossoo Guého, the gentleman from Brest, tole me I'd have to bring the key in the mornin', or, more likely, force it open; so I left it at that."

Mrs. Carmac was puzzled, and showed it. "You say my box is open. Do you mean that it has been smashed to pieces?" she inquired.

"It's hardly been scratched, ma'am. You see, it was this way: When the yacht broke in two, the fore part was carried clean away by the sea. The trawl picked up fittin's an' bits o' machinery two hundred yards from the reef. But the after part must ha' held together longer, an' the heavy seas didn't get at it quite so fierce like. Anyhow, Peridot sort o' nosed out where them boxes might be lyin', an' we sent the diver down—an' sure enough there they were."

"Could the box have been wrenched open while being lifted to the surface?"

Popple scratched his head dubiously, not because of any doubt suggested by Mrs. Carmac's question, but on account of a problem that had bothered him ever since the salvage was effected.

"No, ma'am," he said, evidently weighing his words. "It received no rough usage. It wasn't locked."

"But it was!" insisted the lady, rather emphatically. "I locked it myself before coming on deck after we left Brest. I remember doing so most distinctly."

"Then it's a myst'ry, a real myst'ry, seein' as the lock has been turned. The wards are full o' sand, of course; but that has nothin' to do with their position."

"Where is the box now?"

"Outside on a handcart, ma'am. Jackson's on guard. That's been his job all day—just sittin' on that box. You see, ma'am, you tole me you was particular about it an' the other one; so I've taken care that each of 'em reaches you just as we found it."

"Will you kindly ask the hotel porters to carry the one box here now?"

"Cert'nly, ma'am. There's on'y one thing. The contents are in a sad mess. The sight of 'em may upset you."

"No, no. The loss of the clothing is immaterial. Please have the box brought in."

Popple lost no time. Mrs. Carmac was explaining to Yvonne that the solitary article of jewelry she valued, a necklace of graded pearls, had been left in a locked case, itself inclosed in a locked box, when a porter entered and dumped a rust-covered steel trunk on the floor. Popple untied the knots of a rope that kept the lid in position. Unquestionably, if Mrs. Carmac had turned the key in the lock on leaving her cabin, it had been opened later, either by accident or design.

The owner dropped to her knees instantly. After an alarmed glance at an arrangement of straps beneath the lid, she piled a number of sodden and salt-stained articles on the floor. Soon she was gazing disconsolately at an empty box. The jewel case was not there. But she was more than disturbed, she was exceedingly annoyed.

"I have been robbed!" she cried. "Some one on board the Stella possessed a key that would open a Yale lock, a thing that called for careful planning! I have lost twenty thousand pounds' worth of pearls and diamonds!"

"Mr. Raymond told me the necklace alone was worth ten thousand, ma'am," breathed Popple thickly.

"Mr. Raymond! How came you and he to be discussing the value of my jewels?" She was on her feet now, glowering in anger, a woman despoiled of her prized possessions, and ready to suspect any one.

Popple was apologetic. He felt as if he were personally in default. "We was talkin' one day about the salvage, ma'am. If you remember, you mentioned a lot o' money in notes, which ought to turn up in the trunk at the customs shed, and it seemed sort o' nateral that Mr. Raymond an' I should talk things over."

"Yes, yes. Of course, he knew all about the notes and the rest. Don't look at me in that stupid fashion. I am not accusing you or Mr. Raymond for stealing my belongings. But how can one account for this wretched business? Who could have dared to go to my cabin, when the robbery must be discovered before we reached port that night? I locked both case and box. Here are the keys. Celeste found them in a special pocket inside the skirt I wore that day. My husband's keys were in his pocket, too. They were brought to me by the Mayor on behalf of the police."

She was talking excitedly, almost at random, and had snatched at a porte-monnaie to display the keys, as though the fact that they existed and were in her keeping supplied proof positive that she could not be mistaken.

"It's an awkward business, an' that's the solemn truth, ma'am," wheezed Popple. "It 'ud please me an' Jackson if you'd send for the police an' have 'em search us an' our rooms. Not that we've got much beyond a few bits o' linen—"

"You and Jackson—the steward!" repeated Mrs. Carmac shrilly. "Did you know already that my jewels were gone?"

"We guessed it, ma'am. We didn't like the look o' that there box, an' that's a fact."

She stamped a foot angrily on the floor of polished wood. "It does not concern you or Jackson," she cried. "I would as soon think of blaming Mr. Raymond, who was with me in the dining saloon during all those miserable hours—"

"Blaming me for what, Mrs. Carmac?" came the secretary's harsh voice. The door had been left open when the box was brought in, and Raymond himself was standing there now. He had just returned from Quimperlé, and had the semblance of a man pierced with cold, as the night had suddenly grown chilly. His small eyes roved from Mrs. Carmac's irritated face to Yvonne, who was still seated, and had not interfered in the conversation. Then they dwelt on the empty trunk and the dishevelled heap of its contents.

"You've recovered some of your baggage, I see," he went on quietly. "Is that the box containing your jewel case?"

"It is the box that did contain it at one time," came the vexed rejoinder.

"Do you mean that the case is not there?"

"Yes. Some one has stolen it. I care nothing about the diamonds; but the pearls were given me by Mr. Carmac, and cannot be replaced."

"But—forgive the question—why did you say you do not blame me?"

"I blame no one, you least of any, as you are the one man who was never near my cabin since I quitted it."

Raymond advanced further into the room. After one sharp glance at the flustered sailor, he gazed again at the limp collection of garments on the floor, from which a light haze of steam was curling lazily, as the temperature of the apartment was many degrees higher than that of the wet and closely packed lingerie and dresses.

"This is a very serious matter," he said slowly. "Unfortunately most of the Stella's crew have left Pont Aven."

"My men were not thieves, Mr. ——" broke in Popple fiercely.

"I am not even hinting that they were," said Raymond. "I only mention the chief obstacle in the way of a search for the missing gems—granted the almost incredible thing that any man on board the Stella stole them in the belief that he could win clear with his loot before Mrs. Carmac discovered her loss. Do you mean to send for the police?" he continued, adressing Mrs. Carmac. "And—that reminds me—what of the money Mr. Carmac carried in one of his trunks? Is that gone also?"

Mrs. Carmac snapped that she did not mean to trouble the police. The sooner she was out of Pont Aven and free of its oppressive atmosphere the better she would be pleased. Then, apparently ashamed of her petulance, she explained the mystery of the opened lock.

Ramond tried to be helpful. He frowned judicially. "Where did you actually place the jewel case?" he asked.

"In those straps," she said, pointing to the slings attached to the inside of the lid.

"Then isn't it at least possible that you did not actually lock the box, though believing you had done so? In this event the case, being heavy, may have fallen out, and be now somewhere in the locality where the box was found.

"No," said Popple. "The driver had his orders. He searched pertic'lar." His tone was gruff, even hostile. He would be hard to convince that the secretary's reference to the departed members of the yacht's company was not meant as a slur on their character.

Raymond ignored Popple's curtness. "Still, as you yourself said, captain, the sea acts in a curiously uncertain way at times," he replied blandly. "There will be no harm in making a fresh search to-morrow. Weather permitting, I shall accompany you, if for no other reason than a wish to see once again a place where some of us—not all, unhappily—were so providentially rescued."

Mrs. Carmac rang for Celeste. "Take these articles and give them to Mlle. Julia for distribution among the poor women of the village," she said. Her attitude was eloquent. The pearls were lost irretrievably. She dismissed the subject.

"Mais, madame," cried the dismayed Celeste, "much of the linen is veritably new and only requires washing."

"Do as I bid you. I shall never wear any of those garments again. Captain Popple, here is the key you want. I leave you to deal with the customs people. Will you help Celeste to remove the box? Thank you. Well, Mr. Raymond, you have just returned from Quimperlé, I suppose? Did you have a cold journey?"

Raymond took the cue, and said nothing more of the theft. When Popple and the maid had gone he explained that during the run to Quimperlé he decided that it would be more discreet to telephone Duquesne than send Yvonne's telegram. He was lucky in reaching his friend without delay, and was thus able to give his detailed instructions, including a full description of Madeleine's appearance. Duquesne had promised to meet the train at the Gare Saint Lazare. In fact, he was so eager to serve that, failing Madeleine's arrival at the expected hour, he would meet the next train, and the next. In any case he would telegraph the result early in the morning.

In a word, Raymond had acquitted himself admirably. He had forgotten nothing, left no stone unturned. Yvonne was more than ever grateful.

Mrs. Carmac was tired, almost peevish; so the girl did not remain much longer.

She agreed readily when Raymond asked to be allowed to see her home, and did not demur on reaching the bridge at an unexpected request that she should walk with him a little way down the road to the harbor.

"The hour is not so late," he said deferentially, "and I wish to lay before you a very serious matter. I may surprise you greatly. I may even distress you. But I do want you to believe, Miss Yvonne, that in baring my heart to you I am not swayed by unworthy motives."

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